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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the rise in numbers of non-native English speaking students in British universities has consequences for lecturers trying to be understood by heterogenous audiences. Although listeners may be invited to ask questions, there are linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural pressures on non-native students that can deter them from doing so. The nature of such pressures on would-be questioners is discussed, and ways teaching staff could make the asking and answering of questions less inhibiting are suggested. It is suggested that such attention could be beneficial to the accessibility of lectures to both native and non-native listeners. (Contains 41 references.) (JL)

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Questions in Lectures: Opportunities or Obstacles?

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QUESTIONS IN LECTURES: OPPORTUNITIES OR OBSTACLES ?

Tony Lynch (IALS)

Abstract

One of the consequences of the rise in numbers of nonnative students at British universities is an increased risk that lecturers will fail to make themselves adequately understood to heterogeneous audiences. Although listeners may be invited to ask questions, there are linguistic, psychological and sociocultural pressures on nonnative students that can deter them from doing so. This paper discusses the nature of those pressures on would-be questioners and suggests ways in which teaching staff could make the asking and answering of questions less inhibiting. This would bring benefits in terms of the accessibility of lectures to both nonnative and native listeners.

1. Introduction

As the numbers of students undertaking higher education outside their home country increase, the institutions receiving them are having to devise ways of catering for a student population that includes a substantial proportion of nonnative speakers (NNSs). Most of the effort in that direction is focussed on providing language and study skills tuition for incoming students whose linguistic competence is thought to place them at risk of academic failure. Such tuition may be basically preventive or remedial, taking the form of pre-sessional courses preparing students for entry into the institution or of in-session classes run after the students' main course has started.

For many NNS students the principal problem encountered at the start of their academic course is the difficulty of understanding lectures. Comprehension of the local spoken form of the language is of course a common problem for anyone newly arrived in a foreign country, but the comprehension of lectures raises the additional problem that students' ability to understand, process and note down orally presented information in the first few weeks of the academic session can strongly influence their subsequent performance in written assignments and examinations.

It is for this reason that most English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses provide a substantial amount of practice in the basic skills of listening and notetaking. In designing the lecture comprehension components of pre-session courses, EAP staff may choose among a range of options: to use published texts (e.g. McDonough 1978; Lynch 1983; Mason 1983; James, Jordan, Matthews and O'Brien 1990); to record material from content lecture courses, normally at other departments of the host institution; or to include guest lectures course given by staff members from the students' future department (Lynch 1984). In-session course designers may also adopt a team-teaching model such as that described by Dudley-Evans and Johns (1981), in which the subject

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lecturer and language tutor collaborate to provide a listening/language component to supplement an existing content lecture course.

A considerable amount of effort and thought has therefore been devoted to ways of helping NNS listeners to tune in to the characteristic patterns of lecture discourse. Much less attention has been paid, at least in Britain, to providing assistance to the lecturers. In the United States, universities' increasing use of NNS graduate researchers as teaching assistants on undergraduate courses has led to demands (from both the NNS assistants and their students) for programmes to improve the assistants' speaking skills, and the scale of what is often referred to as the 'foreign T.A. problem' can be gauged by the growth in the related literature (e.g. Bailey, Pialorsi and Zukowski-Faust 1984; Rounds 1987; Byrd, Constantinides and Pennington 1989; Pica, Barnes and Finger 1990).

However, there seems as yet to be no published work on the possible implications of the growing numbers of international students in lecture audiences for the way native speaker (NS) teaching staff package and deliver the content of their lectures or, more specifically, for (re-)training programmes to encourage adaptation to a changing student population. In this paper I discuss what is known about one specific area of lecture discourse - questions from the audience - and how that might provide a starting point for (re)training programmes for lecturers to teach multinational classes. The discussion will draw on two main sources: research into NS/NNS interaction and the lecturing methodology literature.

The reason for concentrating on the issue of questions is simply that the answering (and asking) of questions in lectures is difficult enough, even when both speaker and questioner are operating in their own language (Gibbs, Habeshaw and Habeshaw 1987). The additional problems that can arise when the would-be questioner is a second language user make communication even more complex. Both parties may be reluctant to exploit the potential benefits of audience questions. For the lecturer, a point raised by a student may take the discourse into a side-track (or even lead to a complete derailment). For the students, there are other problems. Apart from the burden of public performance involved in asking a question in front of a large audience, those who do venture a question run the risk of being considered (in the British student culture) 'stupid, attention seekers or creeps' (Gibbs et al. 1987: 155). These difficulties are of course compounded when the questioner is a NNS student by their greater unfamiliarity with the language, the academic culture, or both (Ballard 1984; Dunkel and Davy 1989). We will come back to this question of sociocultural adjustment shortly.

2. Native/nonnative interaction research

Studies of the characteristics of communication between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) have established the importance of the role played by questions in the negotiation of meaning (e.g. Hatch 1978; Long 1981, 1983) and have resulted in the development of a taxonomy of 'listener queries' (Rost 1990) geared to the resolution of ambiguity: the 'clarification request', the 'confirmation check', the 'comprehension check', and so on.

Research into the particular case of NS/NNS interaction in second language classrooms (extensively reviewed by Chaudron 1988) has highlighted two potential benefits to be gained by NNS learners' deployment of such questions. First, these modifications of

interaction have been shown to be more frequent and more consistent than adjustments of input, or language form, (Long 1981) and also to be more likely to enhance the comprehension of NNS learners (Pica, Young and Doughty 1987). Second, a number of authors have argued that a realignment of discourse roles is necessary for the development of a fuller second language competence than can be achieved if NNS learners are restricted to a passive/responsive classroom role (Pica 1987, van Lier 1988, Lynch 1991).

However, one of the complicating factors in any attempt to encourage learner-to-teacher questions is the expectations that the participants bring to the classroom. Many NNS learners will expect the teacher to fulfil the roles of possessor of knowledge and of authority figure that they are familiar with from home, rather than those of informant and facilitator, which may be assumed in the teacher's own approach: 'given the unequal relationships of teacher and student established by the design and organisation of classroom activities, students may begin to feel that their clarification requests and confirmation checks will be perceived as challenges to the knowledge and professional experience of the teacher' (Pica 1987: 12). When the focus shifts to the lecture theatre, as opposed to the L2 classroom, where the lecturer carries the additional authority of content specialist, one might reasonably assume that such NNS listeners will be even more reluctant to intervene and ask questions. Conversely, NNS students coming from an educational culture in which students can and do interrupt lecturers at any point in a lecture may do so more than is expected in the British context, even if they attempt to restrict their interruptions, having recognised that the cultural norms are different.

Turning now to research into NS/NNS lecture discourse, we find that a number of studies have established ways in which lecturers can help NNS members of their audience by modifying their spoken discourse. Linguistically, this includes speaking at a slower pace with clearer articulation and with a greater degree of verbal and visual redundancy (Chaudron 1983; Wesche and Ready 1985; Olsen and Huckin 1990). Rhetorically, more overt signalling of discourse structure and development and of key points appears also to enhance NNS comprehension (Chaudron and Richards 1986). But, as Wesche and Ready have noted, crucial to any discussion of what may help NNS listeners to understand lectures is the extent to which the lecturer is willing to help: native speakers will also vary in their underlying sensitivity to - and even interest in - the comprehensibility of their input to nonnatives (1985: 108)

Olsen and Huckin (1990) argue that what is required for adequate lecture theatre competence is the ability to achieve 'point-driven', rather than 'information-driven', understanding, i.e. that a NNS listener needs to be able to follow the overall development as well as recognise the detail. This conclusion was reached after their discovery that some of the NNS listeners in their study failed despite adequate English, which reinforces the point that competence and ease of lecture comprehension and notetaking is not simply a question of language ability (cf. Dunkel and Davy 1989).

3. Lecturing methodology

It is revealing that in much of the British literature on lecture methodology (e.g. Costin 1962; Bligh, Ebrahim, Jaques and Piper 1975; University Teaching Methods Unit 1976; Curzon 1980), the word 'question' is used exclusively to refer to questions asked of the audience by the lecturer, rather than vice versa, with all that implies about the relative statuses of asker and asked. Expressed in the terms used in NS/NNS research, 'question'

in this field means *comprehension check* rather than *clarification request*. However, one exception to this general trend is the work of George Brown (Brown 1978; Brown and Bakhtar 1983; Brown and Atkins 1988), who recognises that question-asking in lectures is a communicative activity in which there can be an advantage in the listener, as well as the speaker, taking the initiative. Brown and Bakhtar (1983) include the following points in their widely cited set of recommendations to new lecturers:

> *(1) Speak loudly and clearly ... don't go too fast.*
>
> *(2) Plan, prepare, structure every lecture.*
>
> *(3) Make it understandable - explain, emphasise, recap, repeat and summarise main points and relate to current examples and applications.*
>
> *(4) Watch out for reaction and feedback, invite questions and ask questions, encourage participation, involve your audience.*

Item 4 in what may appear to be an unexceptional list in fact contains the potential for revolutionary change. Consider what might happen if lecturers did invite questions from the audience. For many lecturers, it would at the very least create 'tension between the teacher's authority (expressed in his control over content) and his aim of making himself receptive to feedback' (Startup 1979: 29). On the similar issue of allowing questions in business presentations, Jay has written that 'The power of questions to help a presentation is less than thejr power to damage it' (Jay 1971: 67).

However, Brown's call for lecturers to encourage audience participation through questions has been echoed by other writers, who provide practical recommendations as to how this might work: Cannon (1988) suggests avoiding the stress of public questioning by asking the students to make a note of any questions on slips of paper, for the lecturer to collect in and choose from when deciding which points to respond to. Gibbs et al. (1987) propose group-based discussion of points that students want clarified; this would allow them also to decide on a suitable wording for the question, again relieving any one student of the burden of individual performance.

4. Sociopragmatics of questions

An essential preliminary in training lecturers in techniques of dealing with mixed audiences is that they should be made aware of the possible sociocultural problems faced by NNS students entering university. It should be stressed that these are not restricted to second language speakers; however, the degree of unfamiliarity and alienation is likely to be more severe for NNS students. Ballard (1984), investigating the adaptation problems of NNS students entering Australian university, coined the phrase 'double cultural shift' to describe the situation of the second language/culture learner moving both from secondary school to university (or from undergraduate to postgraduate course), and also from home to alien culture, with different norms of authority, personal responsibility and so on. Texts dealing with sociocultural aspects of study abroad, such as the collection edited by Adams, Heaton and Howarth (1991), would provide an appropriate perspective on some of the major issues facing NNS university entrants.

Similarly, Olsen and Huckin (1990), Shaw and Bailey (1990) and Strodt-Lopez (1991) have stressed the need to 'initiate' NNS listeners into the local expectations of lecture theatre behaviour (by lecturer and by students). This is something that has also been recommended in the general methodology literature (e.g. Gibbs et al. 1987; Ellington n.d.) but would be of additional value in the case of lecture audiences with NNS members.

Earlier I referred to Pica's (1987) argument that second language learners may be unwilling to ask the language teacher to repeat or clarify, for fear that such queries may be taken as a slight on the competence or authority of the teacher. The extent to which NNSs' perceptions of the pragmatics of questioning can vary is illustrated by two classroom incidents from EAP courses at IALS. In one case I was working with a group of Indonesian tax officials and had dealt rather unsuccessfully with a request for explanation of a grammar point. I thought I should check that the learners had understood my explanation; the following exchange then took place between the senior student, who usually acted as spokesman for the group, and myself:

T: Would you like to ask any questions about that?
S: *(immediately)* No questions.
T: What about the others?
S: They have no questions.
T: But how do you know the others don't have any questions?
S: Because you are a good teacher.

At the other end of the spectrum was the reaction of a group of Swedish lecturers in science and technology who attended a short course at IALS prior to a period of attachment in various departments at Edinburgh, as part of a scheme to prepare them for teaching international groups of students through English in Sweden. While we were discussing the issue of handling questions in lectures, I asked when they preferred students to ask questions. They seemed perplexed and asked what I meant. When I repeated my question, one said, 'Well, you answer a question when it's asked, don't you?' and the others nodded. Clearly, for this Swedish group, a lecture seemed to be more informal and more conversation-like (at least, with more turn-taking) than would be the norm in Britain. Confirmation of this came when we met after they had spent a week in University of Edinburgh departments and they talked of how surprised they had been by the total absence of questions from students. One had even asked a British student whether he had understood everything in the lecture and was told that he had not; on then asking why the student had not asked for clarification, he was told, 'I go and look it up in the library'.

5. Implications for lecturer training

One important element in any training programme would be to advise lecturers to take time at the start of the lecture course to make clear their personal preferences for the form and timing of audience questions: whether they can be asked during the lecture or afterwards; whether queries will be discussed in plenary, or whether it is up to the individual student to ask the lecturer at the end of the lecture, or by making an individual appointment. Seen in black and white, (as here), such advice may appear trivial, but the evidence is that scene-setting at the beginning of academic courses is rare; as Shaw and Bailey (1990) have shown, NS students are left to work out each of

their lecturers' individual preferences about matters such as question-handling on the basis of hints during the first few sessions of a lecture course. All the more reason, then, for setting out the ground rules explicitly for an international class.

A second element would be the suggestion that lecturers should schedule in two or three 'question pauses' - short breaks in their presentation during which students would be free to raise queries about what has been said up to that point. The advantage of clearly signalling 'time for questions' would be firstly to allow listeners time to review what they have just heard and to formulate questions, and secondly to remove the necessity of bidding for a turn while the lecturer is speaking. Such question pauses, providing an overtly marked space for clarification requests, could do a great deal to assist NNS students to take the initiative in raising points they need to have explained.

Thirdly, lecturers could be given practice in negotiating meaning with NNS questioners. It can be difficult to understand audience queries - whether at the level of intelligibility, comprehensibility or interpretability (Smith and Nelson 1985) - and that problem can become more acute if the questioner comes from a society where it is customary to make the act of questioning more acceptable by expressing the question obliquely. In particular, practice in repeating or rephrasing audience questions - cf. the *confirmation check* of NS/NNS interaction research - should also feature in a lecturer training programme. Seminar skills materials designed for NNS students (e.g. Lynch and Anderson 1992) are one potential source of exercises in appropriate negotiation practice.

6. Conclusion

Much of the work done on pre-sessional courses for incoming students is based on the assumption that a well-planned and well-executed preparatory course can prevent problems arising - in the specific case of lecture comprehension, by improving learners' listening skills to the point where they will understand adequately. However, we cannot guarantee that they will encounter no problems; indeed, since we know that native listeners also experience difficulties (even if less frequent and less marked), we should expect problems to arise. Two practical training approaches would help to reduce the problems: the first would be to provide NNS learners with practice in identifying uncertainties and formulating concise and transparent questions; the second, discussed in this paper, would be to help lecturers unfamiliar with the needs of an international audience to find ways of dealing with comprehension problems when they arise.

The fact that many studies of L2 lecture comprehension characterise the spoken information as input highlights a general imbalance in the way the lecture has been represented as a communicative event, with the emphasis on the transmission of information to an audience. Although this close analysis on what lecturers say and do has resulted in an increased awareness of the benefits for comprehensibility of a clearly signalled discourse structure, there is surely also a case for enhancing lecturers' appreciation of the benefits of making lectures more interactive by encouraging clarifying questions.

Higher education institutions will continue to run study skills courses that develop NNS students' listening comprehension and notetaking skills, but we need also to assist lecturers to cope better with the demands of teaching international classes. Training which emphasises some of the potentially helpful strategies in NS/NNS communication,

such as the questioning discussed in this paper, should make lectures more successful communicative events - for native and nonnative listeners alike.

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